DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 084 CS 511 749

TITLE	Teaching of Phonics.
INSTITUTION	Office for Standards in Education, London (England).
REPORT NO	HMI-329
PUB DATE	2001-10-00
NOTE	11p.; A discussion paper by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI).
AVAILABLE FROM	Available only from the Web site: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/docs/1251.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	British National Curriculum; Curriculum Evaluation; *Instructional Effectiveness; *Phonics; Primary Education; Reading Achievement; *Reading Instruction; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	England; *National Literacy Strategy (England)

ABSTRACT

The change in teachers' attitudes to the teaching of phonics has been one of the significant gains brought about by the National Literacy Strategy. Nevertheless, while phonics is now taught in a high percentage of lessons, there is still much further to go before the quality of the teaching is good enough to have the impact which is needed on attainment in English at the end of Key Stage 1. The strategy has not been without its detractors but, often, they have served to improve the quality of the debate about literacy and draw attention to issues that need to be discussed. The teaching of phonics is one of these and this paper is intended to promote informed debate, based on the findings of inspection. Sections of the paper are: Headlines; Introduction; Teaching Phonics: Expectations; Word Level Work and the Teaching of Phonics; Points for Action; and Conclusion. (RS)

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Teaching of Phonics: A paper by HMI

Reference number: HMI 329

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Headlines

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- Phonics teaching has increased significantly since the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy. The debate is no longer about whether phonic knowledge and skills should be taught, but how best to teach them.
- Although more phonics is being taught, it is still not having enough impact on standards of English at the end of Key Stage 1. In 2001, almost one third of Year 2 pupils failed to reach level 2B in reading and more than four in ten failed to reach level 2B in writing.

Introduction

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1. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) has been in place since 1998. Within that time, there have been substantial changes and improvements in the teaching of literacy. There has also been a significant impact on the standards achieved by pupils at the end of Year 6. These improvements have required a radical change of culture about how to teach reading and writing.

2. The amount of change that has taken place can be illustrated by recalling the context in which the NLS was implemented. In 1996, before the introduction of the NLS, HMI had written, in their critical survey of reading in three local authorities in inner London: 'A significant omission in much of the work was the systematic teaching of an effective programme of phonic knowledge and skills. . . It was an effective component of "reading recovery" sessions, but too often featured as a "last resort" for pupils with reading difficulties rather than "a first resort" for all pupils' (The teaching of reading in 45 inner London primary schools, OFSTED 1996). Phonics was often taught surreptitiously because teachers felt their approach to teaching reading lacked official approval: teaching phonics was certainly not the norm. The vast majority of schools have now moved to an acceptance that phonics needs to be taught, both for reading and for spelling.

3. The change in teachers' attitudes to the teaching of phonics has been one of the significant gains brought about by the NLS. Nevertheless, while phonics is now taught in a high percentage of lessons, there is still much further to go before the quality of the teaching is good enough to have the impact which is needed on attainment in English at the end of Key Stage 1.

4. The strategy has not been without its detractors but, often, they have served to improve the quality of debate about literacy and draw attention to issues that need to be discussed. The teaching of phonics is one of these and this paper is intended to promote informed debate, based on the findings of inspection.

Teaching Phonics: Expectations

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5. In keeping with the 'early learning goals', which are in line with the objectives in the NLS Framework, by the end of the foundation stage, most pupils are expected to be able to:

- hear and say initial and final sounds in words, and short vowel sounds within words
- link sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet
- use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words.

6. The NLS Framework objectives for the reception year also require that pupils should be taught knowledge of grapheme/phoneme correspondences through:

- reading letter(s) that represent(s) the sounds: *a - z, ch, sh, th*;
- writing each letter in response to each sound: *a - z, ch, sh, th*.

Teaching to secure these objectives by the end of the reception year, combined with the key skills of segmenting and blending, provides pupils with a firm grounding for reading

and spelling, not just consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words but also CCVC and CVCC words.

7. The introduction to *Developing Early Writing* (DfES 2001) emphasises the importance of phonics not just as the key to efficient decoding in reading but also as an essential tool for writing. Pupils whose reading skills are fluent do not necessarily have an equivalent skill in spelling. In reading, children are not dependent solely on phonics. In spelling, however, children need to identify and segment the phonemes in words and represent them with the correct selection of letters or groups of letters. They also need to negotiate the hurdles of homophones in English spelling, as well as words which are not phonically regular.

8. Vowel digraphs in English are particularly complicated, especially in terms of making choices for spelling. Understanding vowel digraphs has been the most difficult section of the *Progression in Phonics* (PiP) training for teachers to grasp. It is an issue for teachers in particular at Key Stage 2 who still need to understand-and be able to teach-the earlier stages of spelling development and who have not had the benefit of training in phonics.

9. *Developing Early Writing* notes the importance of the systematic teaching of transcriptional skills (spelling and handwriting):

> *In reception and throughout Key Stage 1, children should be taught transcriptional skills systematically and directly to develop accuracy and speed to an automatic level. These skills cannot be reliably taught as they arise 'in context', through shared writing, because they occur too randomly and infrequently. However, they should be continually and systematically applied in real writing contexts to secure the skills and to teach children how to draw upon and transfer their knowledge effectively.*

10. *Developing Early Writing* identifies 'the systematic, regular and direct teaching of phonics' as one of the key elements of a classroom in which writing is taught successfully. Unless pupils' transcriptional skills are secure, they will not be able to release mental energy to focus on the task of composition. Transcriptional skills eventually need to reach the level of 'automaticity': the basis for this automatic fluency has to lie to a large extent in the work done on phonics in the foundation stage and Key Stage 1.

11. These expectations have not yet been communicated effectively to teachers. The result is coverage of the essential phonic skills and knowledge in reception and Year 1 that is still too slow and unsystematic.

Word Level Work and the Teaching of Phonics

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12. At the end of the first year of the strategy, HMI reported:

> *Initial evaluation of the implementation of the NLS indicated that the weakest element of the literacy hour was the teaching of word level work. Although this aspect of work . . . improved throughout the year, the teaching of word level work remains one of the weakest elements of the strategy; good teaching of word level work took place in only about half of the lessons, and was poor in almost one lesson in five. The key component of*

> *word level work, particularly at Key Stage 1, is the teaching of phonics. Many teachers still lack the confidence to teach reading and spelling through a systematic phonics approach. (The National Literacy Strategy: An evaluation of the first year, OFSTED 1999.)*

13. In a rapid response to the weaknesses identified by HMI in the first year of implementation, the strategy encouraged the production of materials and training during 1999 to support the teaching of phonics. *Additional Literacy Support* (ALS) materials, designed to be used by teaching assistants within the literacy hour, were produced for pupils in Years 3 and 4 who needed extra support, particularly with phonics. *Progression in Phonics* was targeted at teachers in reception and Year 1 and provided a detailed scheme of work for the teaching of phonics from the foundation stage and into Key Stage 1. NLS consultants in LEAs provided extensive training on both sets of materials at the time of their publication and, particularly in the case of *Progression in Phonics*, this training continues.

14. During the second and third years of implementation, HMI revisited, annually, the 300 schools which make up the national sample for the evaluation of the implementation of the NLS. By the end of the third year of the strategy, it was clear that there had been a significant improvement in both the amount and quality of word level work being taught, particularly in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1.

	Year R	Years 1 and 2	Years 3 and 4
Number of lessons	89	93	120
Word level taught % of lessons	96	84	47
Good teaching % of lessons (where taught)	60	54	39
Unsatisfactory teaching % of lessons (where taught)	8	15	22

The quality of the teaching of word level work at the end of the third year of the NLS

15. It should be noted that the word level strand in the *Framework for teaching* includes objectives that are not specifically phonics-related, in particular whole-word recognition and vocabulary extension. Where the inspection evidence indicates that word level teaching was part of a lesson, it cannot be assumed that phonics was being taught. The following conclusions can be drawn from the above table.

- In reception classes, almost all the literacy work includes word level objectives and the teaching of them is good in just under two thirds of the lessons. Word level work is either not taught or not taught well in around one in ten lessons.
- In Years 1 and 2, there is good teaching of word level work in around one half of literacy hours. There is no word level work in one in seven lessons and, where it is taught, it is unsatisfactory in one in six. This amounts to over one in four lessons where the teaching of word level work is either absent or unsatisfactory.
- There is a worrying decline in the teaching of word level work in Years 3 and 4. The teaching of word level objectives in these two year groups is either absent or

unsatisfactory in almost two thirds of lessons.

16. Not all of the reduction in word level work in Years 3 and 4 can be attributed to the increasing demands of sentence level work in Key Stage 2. Some word level teaching takes place only in the group and independent part of the literacy hour for a small group of pupils for whom it is considered necessary, because there is often an underlying assumption that it is unnecessary to teach it to the whole class in Years 3 or 4. This is unsound. Good word level knowledge and skills, particularly phonics, are critically important for spelling which, in turn, has a strong impact on pupils' ability to express themselves fluently and confidently in writing. The NLS Framework is clear that objectives for word level work throughout Years 3 and 4 include revision and consolidation of the phonic knowledge and skills which should have been taught at Key Stage 1, as well as new work on spelling.

17. Despite the strategy's timely production of materials in 1999 and the associated training, it is clear from HMI visits that the impact of these still has to be felt in many schools, particularly in Years 1 and 2 and in the first two years of Key Stage 2. Although there has undoubtedly been a marked increase in the amount of word level work being taught, by no means all of this focuses on the teaching of phonics. Inspection evidence shows that a significant number of teachers at Key Stage 1 use the recommended 15 minutes of word level work for practising the reading and spelling of high frequency words rather than for teaching phonics directly and systematically every day. This misunderstanding about word level work undermines the efforts of the strategy to improve the quality of phonics teaching and, thereby, the quality of reading and writing more generally.

18. *Progression in Phonics* makes it very clear how the 15 minutes of word level work should be used:

> *Throughout Key Stage 1, phonics should be the main focus of the 15-minute word level slot in the literacy hour. Other word level objectives can be met in the context of shared and guided-reading activities, but this is not the case with the focused teaching of phonics. . . .*
>
> *The high-frequency words listed in the back of the Framework are not intended to be taught by rote. They are included because they represent a high proportion of the words children are likely to meet in the early stages of reading. Many of these words are phonically regular and thus perfectly decodable.*
>
> Despite *Progression in Phonics* and the subsequent publication of *Developing Early Writing*, as well as the provision of training to go with them, this approach to word level work has not been understood fully by enough teachers.

19. Additional evidence on the teaching of phonics was provided by inspection visits to 15 schools by HMI during 2000/01, focused on the quality of phonics teaching in Years 1 and 3. The objective of the visits was to examine in detail the factors underpinning the successful teaching of phonics and those which constrained schools from putting into practice the approaches described by the NLS in its publications and training. Although this is only a small sample, the evidence from these visits suggests that there are too many schools which have failed to grasp what they still need to do in order to teach phonics in line with the expectations of the strategy.

20. During the visits, HMI observed two literacy hours, one in Year 1 and one in Year 3 (in

the case of junior schools, two lessons were observed in Year 3); held discussions with the Year 1 and Year 3 teachers about their teaching of word level work, especially phonics; scrutinised planning, and held discussions with the headteacher and the literacy co-ordinator about teaching, planning, assessment, staff training and resources.

21. HMI judged the overall provision for the teaching of phonics to be satisfactory or better in only half of these schools. It was good in only one in four. The quality of the teaching of phonics reflected the broader national picture: there was significantly more teaching of phonics in Year 1 than in Year 3 and the quality of the teaching was also better. Phonics was taught in Year 1 in all but two of the 12 lessons seen; it was satisfactory or better in eight and unsatisfactory in two. By contrast, there was no phonics teaching in just over a half of the Year 3 lessons and it was good in only two of the 15 lessons.

22. A clear picture of strengths and weaknesses emerged from these visits. Unsurprisingly, the quality of leadership and management in these schools, both by the headteacher and the literacy co-ordinator, had a significant impact on the day-to-day work in classrooms as well as on the longer-term planning for staff training and the introduction of consistent approaches to phonics teaching.

Features of good phonics teaching

23. In the visits described, the features consistent with the best phonics teaching were:

- teachers with good subject knowledge, such as the ability to use the correct terminology with pupils and make constructive use of their misconceptions through the assessment of oral and written work
- a brisk pace to teaching
- rapid early coverage of letter/sound correspondences at the rate of several a week
- a focus on phonic skills, that is, hearing, identifying, segmenting and blending sounds, as well as on phonic knowledge, that is, letter-sound correspondences
- regular revision of earlier work to consolidate learning
- an integrated approach to phonics and spelling, that is, recognising that encoding is the reverse of decoding, but that it is also more difficult
- opportunities for pupils to apply their phonic knowledge and skills, especially in shared reading and writing, under the direction of the teacher
- a highly organised sequence of teaching
- effective use of teaching assistants: to support pupils in whole-class work; to provide separate phonics sessions for very young pupils in mixed-age classes; and to provide focused phonics work in Years 3 and 4 during the literacy hour
- effective use of schemes of work, such as *Progression in Phonics* and commercially available material.

24. Good practice in the teaching of phonics was invariably supported by clear, helpful school policies and guidelines. Some successful schools already had a tradition of good phonics teaching prior to the NLS but all gave a high priority to good-quality training and to ensuring that it was put into practice by teachers. The careful selection of published schemes and materials, with clear guidance on how to combine these with NLS material such as *Progression in Phonics*, was also a feature of the policies of the successful schools.

25. For example, a small school with 52 pupils used a judicious mixture of *Progression in*

Phonics and *Jolly Phonics*, the use of the latter having been in place, in the school and the LEA, prior to the implementation of the NLS.

26. In the lesson for a mixed class of reception and Years 1 and 2, the word level work was taught first. It began with a quick rhyme, followed by revision of initial cluster 'sl', then a teaching focus on 'cl' and 'fl'. There was a good emphasis on the pupils' hearing and saying sounds in association with visual prompts. The pupils then played the 'Full Circle' game from *Progression in Phonics*, first changing the medial vowel phoneme to produce different words, for example, 'flip' to 'flap', then changing the final and, subsequently, the initial phoneme to give a variety of words around the theme. Returning to the first word used, 'slip', the pupils chorused 'Full circle!' This was a familiar game which, although straightforward for the Year 2 pupils, provided good consolidation.

27. Further phonic work in the same 15-minute session focused on spelling. Selected pupils stood at the front of the class, with letter cards, standing in the correct order to spell the required word. This was reinforced by more changes of phonemes, for example in the words *bent, pent, pelt, melt, met, net, nest.* Each change was accompanied by the pupils quickly segmenting the sounds to spell the given word and blending to read it, with a deadline to see how many words could be spelt within three minutes to 'beat the clock'.

28. The plenary session provided further consolidation, especially of rhyme for the youngest pupils to enhance their skills in differentiating the sounds at the beginning of a word.

29. In her mêdium-term planning for this mixed-age class, the teacher was able to use elements from all three year-groups' objectives, differentiated accordingly. The objectives were the starting-point for planning, followed by reference to both *Progression in Phonics* and *Jolly Phonics*. Where necessary, on some days the youngest pupils were taught separately by a trained nursery nurse.

30. Approximately three phonemes were introduced each week for reception classes, and there were consolidation and revision activities for older pupils. The teacher saw the mixed-age class as a positive advantage in this respect. Phonics was taught every day, sometimes first and sometimes second within the literacy hour, depending on whether pupils' own writing needed to follow the shared writing session.

31. The assessment of pupils' progress was recorded through individual tick-lists for each child, ordered according to the knowledge and skills required for each year group, and incorporating a quick check for revision. These assessments were used to inform planning, making sure that the pupils were not being taught phonemes with which they were already secure. Several pupils with speech problems required one-to-one help. Provision for them was made through a teaching assistant who spent time with each child separately.

32. This teacher's training had included training on *Progression in Phonics*, led by the LEA's NLS consultants. The teacher had found this very useful, although she had seen no demonstration lessons except those on the training video. However, the video had prompted her to 'be brave and get on with it' - in other words, to put the training into practice. As a result of the increased focus on phonics, as well as her training, the teacher felt she was:

- much more confident in teaching phonics in whole-class lessons to a mixed-age class
- introducing phonemes much more rapidly
- giving greater emphasis to pupils' hearing the phonemes in words, and to saying

and seeing the written representation of phonemes
- providing more work on the phonic skills of segmenting and blending.

Resources to support this included phoneme fans, phoneme frames and individual whiteboards, often for pupils to use in pairs.

Features of poor phonics teaching

33. Weak leadership and management combined with a lack of appropriate training for relevant staff had an adverse effect on the quality of the teaching of phonics.

34. The weaknesses were:

- the lack of a consistent approach to phonics, with too great a variety of materials and schemes in use in different classrooms
- a lack of training, including LEA *Progression in Phonics* training and opportunities to see demonstration lessons or share good practice within the school
- no links between the literacy provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and the broader phonics provision in the school
- inappropriate deployment of support staff (both teachers and teaching assistants)
- a literacy co-ordinator, sometimes with a teaching background in Key Stage 2, with insufficient knowledge, experience or confidence to effect changes
- a high turnover of teaching staff, complicating arrangements for training and professional development and having a negative impact on continuity in pupils' learning
- in junior schools, teachers' lack of knowledge of phonics, including *Progression in Phonics*, and insufficient information about the pupils' previous learning.

35. Many of these features were illustrated vividly in one primary school. In the Year 3 class of 27 pupils, nine of the lower-attaining pupils were withdrawn during the independent/group time of the literacy hour to follow a poor-quality phonics programme while the rest of the class wrote a story plan, following the earlier shared text work. The phonic work for the withdrawal group included low-level worksheets which only required pupils to draw and label an object from a list of given words (for example *rope, nose*).

36. In the Year 1 class, the literacy co-ordinator's good teaching was in marked contrast to that of the Year 3 teacher. She was aware that pupils reached Year 1 from the reception class still not knowing initial letter-sound correspondences. Her phonics teaching built on what she knew the pupils needed and the teaching assistant was deployed well. The teaching assistant's group worked for 10 minutes on consolidating knowledge of the letter-sound correspondences /b/, /e/, /m/, /u/, whilst the rest of the class worked with the teacher on the Cube Game from *Progression in Phonics*, focusing on blending phonemes for reading. The game requires pupils to read an onset and a rhyme, to blend the two and decide whether the result is a real word or not. The teacher's own articulation of phonemes was good and she ensured that pupils' pronunciation was also accurate in order to support their knowledge of the letter-sound correspondences and their skills in blending.

37. Staffing changes, insufficient training and the lack of an agreed approach to the teaching of phonics were at the root of this school's problems. In Key Stage 1, all the teachers who had received *Progression in Phonics* training had left the school and, with

the exception of the literacy co-ordinator, there were temporary staff in reception and Year 2. The Year 3 teacher had no detailed knowledge of what the pupils withdrawn from her class were doing, nor of the materials being used, except that they formed part of the school scheme. She had had no training in phonics and had seen no demonstration lessons, except video material during the implementation phase of NLS training. Although the school had used Additional Literacy Support in the previous year, this had not continued because the teaching assistant did not like using it.

Points for Action

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38. This paper supports the NLS in arguing for the direct, systematic teaching of phonic knowledge and skills in ways that are engaging and enjoyable for pupils. The NLS has succeeded in bringing phonics back into the primary curriculum where it belongs. However, there is still scope for improvement in the way that phonics is taught and in the speed with which it is taught. This has implications not just for schools but also for LEAs and their literacy consultants, as well as those with responsibility for the development of the strategy. In order to strengthen the teaching of phonics:

Schools should:

- ensure that all staff teaching reception pupils or in Key Stage 1 are trained to teach phonics and, wherever possible, are able to observe demonstration lessons
- ensure that phonics is taught daily, systematically and rigorously in the reception year and Key Stage 1
- make appropriate provision at Key Stage 2 for revision and consolidation of the phonic work taught in Key Stage 1, as well as provision for pupils who need additional phonics teaching (for example, through the use of Additional Literacy Support)
- ensure that all teachers have good subject knowledge in the teaching of phonics
- ensure a consistent approach to the teaching of phonics, both within the literacy hour and in any provision made for pupils who require additional support in literacy (especially in phonics).

LEAs and their literacy consultants should:

- continue to provide training for *Progression in Phonics* to take account of staffing changes in schools, including the appointment of newly qualified teachers
- emphasise in *Progression in Phonics* training the guidance that Steps 1 and 2 should take place in nursery classes and into the first term of the reception year and that children who have not had nursery experience may need an accelerated Step 1 at the beginning of the reception year
- ensure that literacy co-ordinators who have a teaching background at Key Stage 2 are knowledgeable about phonics and are able to advise their schools appropriately.

Those with responsibility for the management of the strategy should:

- consider, in any revision to the NLS *Framework for teaching*, the scope for raising

expectations of the speed with which pupils can acquire and apply phonic knowledge and skills in the foundation stage and Key Stage 1

- consider publishing criteria which schools might use to judge the extent to which commercial phonics schemes support the systematic teaching of phonic knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

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39. This paper raises issues about the teaching of phonics. It also provides encouragement that there is good practice in schools and that there have been improvements since the implementation of the strategy. It remains the view of HMI, however, that there is still a significant proportion of schools in which the importance of phonics in improving pupils' reading and spelling has not been recognised. These schools share common shortcomings: the pace of learning is too slow; there is a failure in Years 1 and 2 to consolidate and build sufficiently upon the foundations of phonic knowledge and skills; pupils' mental capacity for the higher-order skills of comprehension and composition is restricted by the attention they have to give to reading and spelling individual words. Taken together, these features exert a downward pressure on standards, making it more difficult improve reading and writing in Key Stage 1 and adding to the difficulties of raising standards at Key Stage 2.

40. The *Framework for teaching* was written against a background of intense debate, not just about whether phonics should be taught at all but also about the ways in which it should be taught most effectively. The word level strand in the current Framework, especially for Key Stage 1, reflects the debate about the teaching of literacy at that time. That debate has moved on and a good deal has been learned about the speed with which children, when they are taught well, are capable of acquiring phonic knowledge and skills. Schools use a wide range of published schemes and materials for the teaching of phonics, not always consistently, and their use of *Progression in Phonics* is not yet as effective as it should be. This would be a good time to look again at the strategy's expectations for the teaching of phonics and the way they are conveyed in the *Framework for Teaching* and *Progression in Phonics*.

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